SEXUAL ETHICS WITHOUT RELIGION

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In the popular mind, ethics is linked to religion. Religion teaches that God determines right and wrong and that doing what religion teaches is following God's will. That is true in some way, but it is not straightforward.

We come to know right and wrong only gropingly. Especially when new issues arise—like genetic engineering or chemical contraception or sexual orientation—we struggle to decide what is the right response. When we finally decide, if we have acted honestly and in good will, we say that our decision, such-and-such, is the will of God. For surely what is good, as best we can determine, is what God would want.

But attributing ethical conclusions directly to God does not guarantee that they are correct. And imposing them on others in the name of God may be the ultimate abuse of power.

With the advent of gay liberation, and for absolutely valid reasons, many lesbians and gays rejected the religions that formed and bound them. In the process, some rejected not only the sexual ethics they were taught but also the very notion of valid sexual ethics. The problem of linking ethics with religion is that when the one goes, so does the other. When experience makes clear that religious requirements must be wrong, all requirements go out the window, and sexual expression becomes a free-for-all.

The fact of the matter is that ethics is built right into human nature. Our very minds demand that we only affirm what is true—and you cannot dispute this point without confirming it in your very arguing. Similarly, our minds demand that we do only what is good—what is positive, upbuilding, enhancing, what opens onto growth.

In the depths of our hearts is a spiritual core. We are geared to embrace the universe, so we spontaneously marvel at beauty, and we long to love and be loved. The lasting fulfillment we desire, of course, always eludes us, but our very desire leads us ever more deeply into the experience of life.

Still, only goodness has a future; falsehood and evil inevitably self-destruct. Only what squares with the nature of things can hope to survive long-term. Our spirits sense this fact, so they flee the disorder that is evil, and they gravitate toward the harmony of the good. Experience of this inner movement is called conscience. We ourselves, the very structure of our being, are the source of ethics. Our inherent desire to live ever more deeply urges us to choose what brings richer life.

Thus, the ethics that cultures and religions propose is only the good-willed application to specific issues of the spiritual longing for fulfillment that is built into the human heart. Doing what is right means genuinely serving our own best interests. It might have nothing to do with God and heaven, for what is right must be equally right for the agnostic as for the believer.

Then the general ethical question is simply, What contributes to the good? What furthers ongoing growth? What makes for lasting satisfaction? These questions also govern sexual matters.

But sex in human beings is complicated. Former thinking—built on Stoic philosophy and funneled into Christianity through St. Augustine—held that, animal-like, sex equated with procreation. But human sex includes not just physical response and biological function. It also entails emotional entanglements. And even more than that, it opens onto the spiritual in us so that making love seduces lovers into dreaming dreams and making promises. Sex in humans opens onto the meaning of life and a universe of shared experience. This is the way human sex is. So "what furthers ongoing growth" in sex must respect all these dimensions.

That broader understanding implies that sexual sharing can be completely ethical even outside the confines of heterosexual, child-bearing marriage—as long as, to some degree, as appropriate in each case, the sexual sharing unleashes its life-enhancing potential. Thus, allowing pleasure, fostering bonding, and triggering shared visions and virtues, lesbian and gay relationships, though biologically non-procreative, might express the essential and distinctive nature of human sexual experience as much as heterosexual relationships might. There is no inherent reason why gay and lesbian relationships cannot be fully ethical—which is to say, loving, constructive, life-giving, upbuilding, growth-producing, fruitful, productive.

Such broad understanding of sexual intimacy differs from other commonly heard opinions. Some myopically limit sex to the physical. They argue that pleasure is sovereign and it legitimates any sexual experience. Others, more subtle but still narrow, move on the emotional plane. They insist on being "in love" or at least having feelings for someone before engaging in sex.

In fact, both those emphases are on target, and they are acceptable—but only if they are incorporated into the broader picture. Once incorporated, they get nuanced. Not any pleasure, not any emotional bonding and delight, but only those that truly serve ongoing growth are allowed. Only those respect the full nature of human sex, and only those are genuinely fulfilling: we are more than bodies and emotions; the human spirit also requires its due.

With that understanding, basic ethical rules fall easily into place—not come down from heaven, not imposed by parents, society, or religion—but built right into our own sexual natures and interpersonal relationships. No disease. No physical harm. No unwanted pregnancy. No coercion or manipulation. No abuse of the immature and naive. No emotional harm. No violation of commitments. No betrayal of personal values. These negatives are there because violation of them is destructive.

Positively, human sexual sharing requires honesty, trustworthiness, mutual enjoyment, mutual support—some degree of concern and commitment. These requirements may seem restrictive, and in some ways they lead to the same kind of behavior that religion at

its best traditionally advocated. Yet these requirements are also more freeing than the traditional.

If they require concern and commitment, they do not stipulate eternal vows. The nature of each relationship will specify how much concern and commitment is possible and necessary for the relationship actually to be loving, not only in the present moment but also in its long-term effects. It is certainly possible that a passing sexual encounter could respect all these requirements and really be for the overall good of the people involved. It is also possible that a relationship might involve more than two people, whether in sexual intimacy itself or in some configuration of interweaving relationships, and really be for the common good. The "open relationship," the ménage a trois, and the mistress or gay lover alongside a heterosexual marriage are typical examples. All are possibly ethical, but all are questionable. Real relationship tends to break down in these cases. Almost inevitably someone gets badly hurt. But then again, people inevitably get hurt in any relationship. Everything human is messy.

Whether or not those involvements are actually good is the telling question. Answering this question is not always easy, and imposing blanket answers is not helpful. Being willing to ask the ethical question and to follow the required answer in each case—this is what makes people and their behavior ethical. And again, the honest answers will usually fall right where traditional morality placed them.

A key complexity of human sex is that it is not just a physical encounter. Humans are persons. In addition to bodies, we have emotions and we have spirits. This is what it means to be a person. So human sex is an interpersonal enterprise. The interpersonal dimension of human sexuality is entwined with the ethical requirements. Indeed, ethical, personal, and interpersonal begin to sound like synonyms.

Ethical requirements are not simply a matter of altruism, of being concerned about others. This simplistic me-versus-you view of morality is totally misguided. Ethical requirements are a matter of wholesome self-serving that is inextricably entwined with the good of others.

Our whole constitution is outgoing. The horniness in our loins, the longing of our emotions, the dreams and promises of our spirits—all impel us unrelentingly outside ourselves. We fulfill ourselves through interaction with what is beyond us. And when we fulfill ourselves in the good, we actually become that good even as we share it with others. What we are and what they are in honest and loving living becomes one and the same. All talk of selfishness versus altruism is a bugaboo.

The sexual act symbolizes this distinctively human state of affairs: when sexual sharing proceeds well, what is good for me is good for you, and vice versa. The physical pleasure, the emotional bliss, and the spiritual self-transcendence—yours and mine—are mutually enhancing. It's a win-win situation.

We are social animals. We live in and with one another. Human sex cannot be extricated from a social context. Even solo-sex usually involves fantasies, memories, and longings about others.

Then it is insane to protest, "My body is my own," "No one has a claim on my life," and "I have the right to do with myself whatever I please." Such claims for a new "ethics" are appearing of late in the gay community.

Weary of the restriction on free-for-all sex that the AIDS epidemic sanely imposed, some free spirits are mounting a campaign to restore the irresponsible days of yore when gay liberation was struggling to be born and desperately threw off all restraints. They claim that physical pleasure is the meaning of sex. They claim the right to high risk behavior in the pursuit of pleasure. Fetishizing HIV, they use risk of infection to heighten the excitement of sex. They claim the right, with consenting partners, to do whatever they wish.

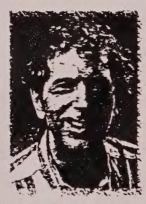
Under many circumstances, they certainly can do whatever they wish. After all, there's truth in the standard schoolyard protest, "It's a free country." But that they have the right is mistaken. And the matter is not worth discussing in these terms. The language of rights is part of the bugaboo of me-versus-you.

This cut-off-my-nose-to-spite-my-face mentality misunderstands the nature of human beings and of society, for both coincide. This mentality mistakenly thinks laws and morality are restrictions imposed from without and fails to see that valid ethics arise from, and serve, our own selves. We are not always sure what the valid ethics are, but pretending there are no ethical requirements in life is not the solution.

No one belongs solely to themselves. Family, teachers, neighbors—all have an investment in us. The extreme example is the GI, who is "government issue," property of the state. He or she will be punished for self-destructive behavior since it costs the military money. Similarly, family, friends, and society at large pay the price for irresponsible sex that results in HIV infection. It is an illusion that the sex of consenting adults is solely their own business. The notions of adultery, infidelity, and sacred vows have long expressed other societal implications of sex.

Like it or not, human sexuality is a social reality. Its inherent ethical nature has social implications built right into it. People may kick against the goad and refuse to accept the human state. But such refusal is simple stupidity. One can only lose. Religions call that refusal sin and relate it to God.

Understanding what the religions were attempting to do and taking up the task in their place or as a part of them—for the task is really our own—will provide a new ethics that actually meets current needs as we enter the third millennium. Then we might also hope to see a fourth millennium—and heaven, ultimate fulfillment, as well. ▼



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